

SOCIETY FOR GROWING AUSTRALIAN PLANTS

INDIGENOUS PALM STUDY GROUP

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Here once more adding my pen to what is known in this fascinating world of Australian principles. However, I would just to voice one plea! We have in our numbers, enthusiasts from N.S.W., Vic., South-East Qld., and perhaps Darwin, but to my knowledge only 3 live in Northern Qld.

As this area has such a fascinating record for really interesting palms I would like more active members from the north.

Townsville is my particular target, so if any member of S.G.A.P. knows of palm enthusiasts belonging to our organisation within this area, tell them of our activities of the Northern Group of A.P.A.C.S. and their involvement in making a palmery there. Surely some of this group also belongs to S.G.A.P.?

Possibly one of the strangest palms I have come across, and then, only briefly is *Nypa fruticans* (The Mangrove Palm). Recently near Lucinda Nth. Qld., I was shown large colony of them, growing in a brackish, swampy creek. This being believed to be the most southernmost stand of this huge palm! Mrs. Bosworth, who accompanied me into the creek to take photographs, tells me it also grows around fresh water swamps. I did not find any seed evident, but it has chestnut brown seed, packed in a globular head which can be 45 cm (18") across! The male flowers are yellow and are borne on lateral catkins. No trunks were evident, but that is hardly surprising when it is realised the trunk is procumbent and often forked below the water or mud of the creek. The great feathery rachis rise in a stiff crown, each individual one can be 9m (28 ft) long. The "fronds" are outstanding in size and shape. The prostrate trunk often roots along its lower surface!

Native tribes around the Lucinda to Cardwell areas ate the unripe seeds and named this palm "Ki-bano". Like the mangroves themselves, this palm is important to coastal ecology, and helps to stabilise the area it is found in.

It is quite evident that this palm would be ideal for hut thatching or even basket weaving, but although this is done where it occurs overseas, there is not much evidence that Australian aborigines used it to great extent.

It is known that the bouyancy structure of the seed allows it to float away on tides as does the cocos, thus helping in its distribution.

Further north on our coastline, I found many specimens of the really neat and lovely *Hydriastele wendlandiana* or "water palm".

Sometimes this palm can be confused with *Ptychosperma macarthurii* (the grey cane palm) especially where the smaller palmllets around the base are advanced. Distinguishing features however are the tall, narrow, single trunk with smaller plants grouped around the base. The leaves are feather type irregularly spaced, the tips jagged but the terminal ones are fishtail in form. The seed hangs from pendant rows from a drooping flower head just below the crown shaft. The seed colour is bright red when ripe. This lovely palm requires plenty of water to grow it well, is really a very tropic species, but has been established in our sub-tropics by using plenty of mulch around it and growing it in ground soaks or on the sloping banks of small streams. It requires top cover from the sun being a typical rainforest type, but in its habitat it reaches about 20 metres at maturity, as generally at this stage, the palm has its head in the sun!

*Carpentaria acuminata* (Darwin Palm) grows in thick pockets of rainforest in moist areas quite near the coast of the Gulf country extending across much of the Northern Territory. Until, fairly recent times not much was known or written about it. In fact, in McCurracks "Palms of the World" it is mentioned but only as a possibility of its existence.

This palm is used for landscaping and as a street palm throughout the Darwin districts. It is a solitary trunk palm, feather leaf type with height of possibly 16' metres. The trunk is slender and grey with distinctive rings. The oval fruit which ripens about December is red with yellow markings. It has a prominent crown shaft the leaves recurving and dark green. Very sensitive to frosts in the subtropics but have been grown there. Group plantings of this palm can be quite outstanding.

#### Care & Propagation of Palms

Propagation by seed is a long process, and requires the patience of Job! Germination is slow, and below I have listed a few instances of approximate times for some exotics.

*Chamaerops* - about 12 months: *Phoenix* - eight months: *Howeas* (Kentias) - often 2 years: *Washingtonia* - nine months: *Cocos* - six months, etc. Fresh seed is essential.

The process of growing palms from seed is fascinating, and for the keen amateur or budding professional here is a tried and proven method.

Initially, the seed raising mixture must be sterilised, or more correctly "pasteurised". Soils may contain weed seed, nematodes, harmful fungi or bacteria. The so-called "damping off" of infant plants is caused by fungi in the soil.

Steam is the best and most common heat source of preparing soil. For the home gardener however, a good method is to dampen your mix and place it in the kitchen oven for say 30 minutes at a thermostat temperature of 60°C.

Another method is to place the prepared mix in a large clean plastic bag, seal it and expose it to the sun on a lawn or concrete path for a few hours. Temperature in the bag should reach 82° for good results. A sandy soil rich in humus seems to favour good germination.

If growing any quantity it is also necessary that the seed be grown in a shallow seed pan. The reason for this is that when the palm seed germinates it first produces a long tap root, which, if there is sufficient depth of soil will go down a long way before it makes fine lateral roots.

To make nice plants it is necessary to lift the seedlings while very small, and place them in 3 inch pots. It will thus be seen that it will be quite impossible to get a plant with a long, still tap root into a small pot. Shallow seed pans were once purchased at a pottery, but today the plastic tray is favoured.

The bottom of the seed pan should be covered with small gravel or graded pea sized charcoal for drainage. Then the pan is filled to within half an inch of the top with the mixture. Commercial seed raising mixtures are available, but a strong compost of three parts loam with equal parts of sand and peatmoss or leaf mould can be used.

Press the medium down firmly, and after washing away any fruit left on the seed, press them down into the mixture until they are level with the surface. Then cover with soil to approximately twice the seed thickness.

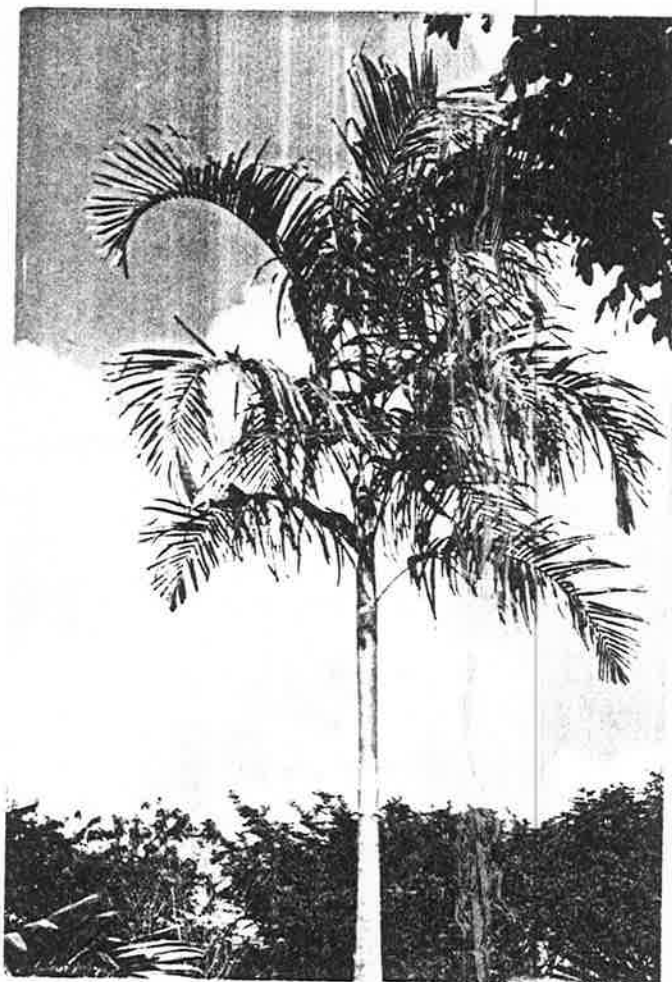
Palm seed can germinate erratically. Plants will sometimes appear a month or two after sowing, while others will not come up for twelve months.

Pick them out while quite small, say the start of the second seed leaf, and place in small pots. These should be moved into pots one size larger when the root system is established.

Points to remember - watch for signs of "damp off", and prevent this by the use of a reliable fungicidal spray.

Potting soil should be of a texture somewhat heavier than that generally used for most potted plants. Three parts loam, one part leaf mould, and one part sand being about correct. Add to this very well rotted cow manure or bone meal and the palm seedlings should grow quite successfully.

When growing on, apply foliar fertilisers in the evenings in the warm months. Shade from the direct rays of the sun, and syringe the leaves often.



CARPENTARIA ACCUMINATA AT VICTORIA ESTATE,  
INGHAM GARDENS.



NYPA FRUTICANS AT LUCINDA.